

Documents on Diplomacy: The Source

Alaska: A Brilliant Achievement

A Dispatch from Cassius M. Clay to Secretary Seward, No. 140

Legation of the United States, St. Petersburg, Russia, May 10, 1867

Sir: Your despatch, No. 241, April 1st, 1867, enclosing me the treaty between Russia and America, ceding us all Russian America, was duly received. I awaited the expression of European and Russian sentiment in reference thereto before answering you. I congratulate you upon this brilliant achievement, which adds so vast a territory to our Union, whose ports, whose mines, whose timber, whose furs, whose fisheries are of untold value, and whose fields will produce many grains, even wheat, and become hereafter in time the seat of hardy white population. I regard it as worth at least \$50,000,000, and hereafter the wonder will be that we ever got it at all. My attention was first called to this matter in 1863, when I came over the Atlantic, with the Hon. R. J. Walker, upon whom I impressed the importance of our ownership of the western coast of the Pacific in connection with the vast trade which was springing up with China and Japan and the western islands. He told me that the Emperor Nicholas was willing to give us Russian America if we would close up our coast possessions to 54° 40'. But the slave interest, fearing this new accession of "free soil," yielded the point, and let England into the great ocean. Since then, in connection with the necessity of our owning one end of a European telegraph line, quite independent of England, I have talked with and I have urged the Russian authorities in a private way to put the privileges of the Hudson's Bay Company, to sublet them by the Russian American Company, in our hands with a view of having the natives friendly to us, and one telegraph line, &c., in case of war. And I trust I have aided indirectly in this final cession, which by your address and secrecy took me with a most agreeable surprise.

There is here beginning to be a party of "ins" and "outs," as in America and England; and they ("the out") have attempted to make interest against the administration by attacking the treaty. The Russians are very jealous of foreigners, and traditionally opposed to

ceding territory; yet in consequence of the good feeling everywhere prevailing in our favor, I regard the role as popular. I have heard it said, "Well, we have sold to you too cheaply, but 'tis all in the family;" and others look upon it with favor, because we are to be near their eastern possessions, and as they regard as perpetual friends; in hopes that it may ultimately lead to the expulsion from the great Pacific nations whose power in the east is justly feared. It went very hard with the English, and also with the French; and if you had given time and publicity to your movements I have no doubt you would have had most energetic protests, if not positive armed intervention to prevent it. For in my opinion the present *entente cordiale* between England and France began in a common understanding to limit our power on the American continent and elsewhere. But the strange and unexpected good alliance between Russia and America has taken them by surprise, and disables all their projects. The truth is, England and France are no match now for the United States and Russia, and the weight of power with the coming years will be still more on our side. I have done all I could here to bring about this most desirable result, which has already saved both of us from war. And so strong is the feeling of mutual interest that no administration here would lightly set it at defiance. . . .

Believe me truly, my dear sir, your obedient servant,

C. M. CLAY

Source

United States Department of State, *Message of the President of the United States to the two houses of Congress, at the commencement of the second session of the fortieth congress*, Vol. I [Washington, D.C.: 1867-68]

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